

## Food Waste Diversion at Special Events

### Introduction

Diverting leftover food and food scraps at special events such as fairs, conferences, sporting events, and trade shows can be a great opportunity to reduce waste handling and disposal costs. Early coordination between event staff, food preparation staff, waste haulers, food banks, and composters is critical to a successful effort. Below you will find suggestions and strategies for starting up or improving a food diversion program at your special events.

### Considerations

The following are some of the more important considerations to be addressed in establishing your food waste diversion program.

### *How Does a Food Diversion Program Work?*

Below are three main types of food scraps:

- Unserved, edible food.
- Kitchen preparation scraps.
- Postconsumer plate scrapings.

Three main uses for collected food are:

- Food bank or charity kitchen.
- Animal feed.
- Making compost.

### *Do You Have Dedicated Staff to Oversee a Food Diversion Project?*

Food collection doesn't happen by itself. Chefs must set aside reusable food for charity collection. Staff members need to locate, monitor, and service collection bins consistently throughout the event.

Contamination with non-compostable items, especially glass, is the most frequent cause of load rejection by farm and compost processors. Event staff should routinely check for bin contamination

and overflow problems and relocate bins if necessary. Staff must also post educational signs for patrons and train vendors to separate their food trimmings.

### *What Types of Food Operations Will Be Involved?*

For catered events, menu design will affect the amount and type of leftovers. Buffets generally produce larger amounts of reusable leftovers than individually served meals. Unserved buffet trays of food can be donated to food rescue organizations if this service is available in your area. Unfortunately, buffets also tend to have more postconsumer leftovers.



Once placed in front of patrons, food cannot legally be re-served, though it can be used for animal feed or compost. Catered events offer greater opportunity to control the flow of food scraps, since only one food service provider is involved.

Therefore, your choice of caterer is critical to the success of your food diversion efforts. Ask potential caterers if they can provide reusable dishware or biodegradable products, and inquire about their willingness to separate pre- and postconsumer food scraps.

Contracts with food service providers can dictate the type of food waste to be generated as well as the recyclability of packaging and service ware. Work with your food service contractors early on to control the types of compostable materials, recyclables, and potential contaminants.

For state fairs, festivals, and sporting events with multiple food vendors, working with vendors

ahead of time is particularly important to maximize the amount of recyclable and compostable materials and minimize materials that will end up in the disposal stream. An effective way to achieve this is to include contract language that requires recyclable and compostable food service ware. The contract should require the vendors to separate recyclable and compostable materials used behind the counter. By making this part of the contract, a level playing field is created for service providers bidding on the contract, and bidders know what to expect.

### ***What Type of Food Will Be Collected?***

Collecting pre-consumer food scraps for diversion is relatively simple since the number of staff to educate and coordinate is small. Non-contaminated kitchen prep trimmings, such as cornhusks, lettuce, and onion culls, may be suitable for licensed animal feed operations or composters that can accept agricultural residuals.

Collecting postconsumer food scraps will increase the total volume of scraps collected. However, this may also limit the options for depositing these scraps, increase the potential for contamination, and widen the target group for education. Training patrons to separate scraps can be difficult due to the distractions of the event.

### ***Collection Bins***

Cross-contamination of food waste with unacceptable materials such as glass is a very common cause of load rejection by composters. To minimize contamination, be sure compostable material collection bins are well labeled, with graphics and appropriate translation for non-English speaking and developmentally challenged users.

Kitchen prep collection bins should be located for easy access by staff or they won't be used. Consider placing a small container on the prep table itself that can be dumped as needed into a larger container at the end of the table.

If postconsumer food is to be collected by staff, a separate area should be set up for postconsumer

food waste bins so as not to contaminate the kitchen. Place a food collection bin beside the busing table and instruct staff about acceptable organic materials.

If patrons are to separate food, then bins should also be placed where food is purchased or served, but more importantly where food is consumed.

Collection of compostable materials may have more success and less contamination if patrons can place biodegradable products into bins instead of separating food from non-biodegradable products, such as foam or plastic plates, cups, and utensils.

Contamination problems can occur even if separate garbage and food bins are placed next to each other with good signage. Bin shape, size, and color can all be used to differentiate the bins. The bins should look different enough so the user recognizes a difference.

### ***How Many Meals Will Be Served? How Many Attendees Are Expected?***

This information will help estimate the number of collection containers needed. Annual or ongoing event planners should have access to useful data from past events. A one-day event for fewer than 200 people with only lunch and snacks may not produce enough scraps for commercial collection.

### ***What Type of Food Scraps and Collection Bags Will Food Waste Processors Accept?***

Check with the compost facility or end processor to determine which materials are acceptable. Vegetarian meals or fruit and vegetable waste with only small amounts of meat or cheese mixed in are more likely to be acceptable.

Products such as cheeses, sauces, meat scraps, or coated paper products are less likely to be accepted. Collection bin liners can help improve bin cleanliness and reduce residual odors, but if they are made of non-biodegradable plastic, ask if the compost operator can handle them.

If biodegradable bags or food service ware are to be used, be sure they are acceptable to the compost facility before purchasing.

### ***What Type of Food Service Tableware Will Be Used?***

Food service ware may not be needed at all. Catered events may choose to serve “finger foods” or use food in compostable food wrappers or on napkins as a waste prevention measure. Using washable kitchenware and tableware will also significantly reduce the volume of disposed materials.

Some caterers may request a fee for the additional handling of reusable dishware, so be prepared to negotiate a price. In some casual situations it may be appropriate to encourage patrons to bring their own cups, plates, and utensils when possible.

If reusable tableware items cannot be obtained, the use of biodegradable food service ware will increase the volume of materials to be collected for composting and decrease contamination and trash volumes. This will also reduce potential problems of contamination during source separation. Also, you may need fewer bins, less space on the loading dock, and less staff oversight.

Some composters have the ability to screen out plastics in their processing, but all composters prefer a clean organic stream.

### ***Does Your Event Produce Large Amounts of Meat and Grease that Can Be Rendered?***

Since excess meat can be problematic for some composters, consider having meat, bone, grease, and oils collected by a rendering service.

### ***Can Some of the Food Be Donated?***

Food that is still suitable for human consumption and has not been served should be fed to people. If you anticipate vendors having leftover food that is still edible, ask a local food bank or food rescue program ahead of time to arrange for pickup.

### ***Who Will Transport the Food?***

Don't forget the missing link in your plan—transportation. Hauling can be as simple as using a small pickup truck. For large events, you may need a front-end loader to pick up 2- or 4-yard

bins, or a box van or refrigerated truck for edible foods. The end processor, whether it is a food bank, hog farm, or composter, can often provide or arrange this service for you.

### ***Additional Tips***

During initial planning, emphasize California's waste reduction goals with event coordinators, sponsors, and administration. Let them know that your food diversion efforts complete the recycling ethic of separating other commodities such as cans and bottles.

Although food diversion can avoid disposal costs, anticipate some additional costs for biodegradable products and recycled-content products, transportation costs, or miscellaneous surcharges.

### ***Visit these free websites for more information:***

For more food scrap management advice, see [www.ciwmb.ca.gov/FoodWaste/](http://www.ciwmb.ca.gov/FoodWaste/) or call (916) 341-6620.

Search the Recycled Content Products (RCP) Directory for thousands of recycled products: [www.ciwmb.ca.gov/RCP/](http://www.ciwmb.ca.gov/RCP/).

To find the location of a beverage container-recycling center near you, see [www.bottlesandcans.com/where\\_main.php](http://www.bottlesandcans.com/where_main.php).

To find a contact for your local food bank, see [www.cafoodbanks.org](http://www.cafoodbanks.org), or call (916) 456-2232.

For more waste reduction advice about venues and special events, see [www.ciwmb.ca.gov/venues/](http://www.ciwmb.ca.gov/venues/)

To find your city or county local government recycling coordinator, see [www.ciwmb.ca.gov/profiles/juris/](http://www.ciwmb.ca.gov/profiles/juris/) (choose the appropriate county, select the “submit” button, choose your jurisdiction from the list, then select the “contacts” tab).

The statewide recycle hotline 1-800-RECYCLE and the website [www.earth911.com](http://www.earth911.com) also have lists of local recycled material haulers and buyers.

To find a local composter, see [www.ciwmb.ca.gov/FoodWaste/Compost/Facility.htm](http://www.ciwmb.ca.gov/FoodWaste/Compost/Facility.htm). Not all compost facility operators are permitted to accept food scraps, so be sure to ask for a list of acceptable materials and unacceptable contaminants.

For a list of compostable tableware product suppliers, see [www.ciwmb.ca.gov/FoodWaste/Compost/Biodegrade.htm](http://www.ciwmb.ca.gov/FoodWaste/Compost/Biodegrade.htm).

To locate manufacturers and sellers of recycling collection containers, see [www.bottlesandcans.com/why\\_businesses\\_bins.html](http://www.bottlesandcans.com/why_businesses_bins.html), or you can call 1-800-Recycle to receive a copy of the contact list addresses and phone numbers.

**Join Governor Schwarzenegger to Keep California Rolling. Every Californian can help to reduce energy and fuel consumption. For a list of simple ways you can reduce demand and cut your energy and fuel costs, Flex Your Power and visit [www.fypower.com/](http://www.fypower.com/).**